

# GAME OVER

Ryan was  
the worst  
tennis  
player  
ever—  
but that  
was the  
least  
of his  
problems.

BY ERIC KAHN GALE



SHUTTERSTOCK (TENNIS BALL)





### CHARACTER

What clue does this give you about the kind of person Ryan is?

### INFERENCE

What does he mean? What else does he want to change?



### AS YOU READ, THINK ABOUT:

How does it feel to be an outsider?



was in kind of a funk at school that had lasted an entire year. It began at our first attendance call, when Jason Coulson noticed that my last name sounded like something gross. I'll spare you the details, but the important thing to know is that everyone was calling me this awful nickname, and trusted friends were scarce.

**I pretended like it didn't bother me and declared middle school a lost cause.** Instead, I set all my hopes on an after-school tennis class my parents signed me up for in the next town over. On the first day, I walked through the doors of the gymnasium and saw five kids sitting on the bleachers. The ceiling was high, and a tennis net stretched across what was normally a basketball court. **I took that as a good sign: Anything can change.**

I strode over to the group of kids like we were already friends. "Hi," I said, tossing back my head in the universal gesture of casual coolness. "My name's Ryan. I'm here for tennis."

**Smiles sprouted on all five faces.** "Hey, I'm Vera!" said a brown-haired girl sitting near me. She stood up. "Do you want to hear a joke?"

"Um, a joke?" I said. Would it be something about me? Maybe something about my last name? No, they knew me only as Ryan, nothing else.

"Parallel lines have so much in common," Vera said. "It's a shame they'll never meet."

Some of the kids laughed. I chuckled awkwardly. It wasn't about me at all, I realized. I laughed harder, breaking out in a hilarious fit. I was so happy it wasn't about me!

I learned the other kids' names were Anna, Alex, Marta, and Roman. The five of us traded jokes for a few minutes, and I felt myself relax. Marta asked where I went to school. "Southfield," I told her. "Do you know anyone who goes there?"

She put her finger on her chin and thought about it, then shook her head. I was in the clear.

When the gymnasium doors swung open, we all whipped our heads toward it. A tall red-haired woman stepped into the room. "Hello! Hello, my students!" she said, smiling brightly. "Welcome to tennis class. Sorry I'm late. We will start after I take attendance."

The instructor spoke with an accent, but I couldn't place it. She sat at the edge of the bleachers and pulled out a clipboard. "All right! My name is Nadia, and, of course, I'm here," she said, looking at the clipboard. "Anna Burmakin?"

Anna raised her hand.

"Marta Dmitriyev?"

Marta said, "Here!"

"Roman Gruzinsky?"

Roman nodded.

There were only a few names left. I had a feeling mine would be next.

"Ryan M—"

"Yes! I'm here!" I shouted. "I just go by Ryan. No need for a last name." I smiled a big smile and shrugged my shoulders like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"OK," the instructor said, giving me a funny look. "Just Ryan. Is Alex Verennikov here?"

Alex raised his hand. I blew out a sigh of relief. I was making it past attendance. No one had heard my name.

"And Vera Yermolayev?" the instructor said, hovering her pencil over the last name.



### DESCRIPTIVE WRITING

Why might the author have used the word *sprouted* here instead of writing just "They smiled"?

Vera smiled and raised her hand. “Da, ya tut!” she said.

I did a double take. What was my new friend Vera talking about? I shot a look at Anna: Was this another joke?

**The teacher’s face contorted into a thoughtful expression. “Vse zdes’ govoryat po-russki?”**

My eyes went wide at that. I scanned the faces of Marta, Anna, Alex, and Roman to see if any of them could give me a clue about what was going on. But none of them looked surprised.

“Da, ya govoru po-russki,” Roman said.

“Moi roditeli govoryat po-russki doma,” said Marta.

Alex and Anna turned to each other and began having a conversation in complete gibberish.

Was everyone messing with me? I looked around at all of them happily conversing in what sounded like a foreign language.

Then it hit me. **The names.** I’d been so concerned they’d make fun of my name, I hadn’t paid attention to theirs. Each one sounded strange but similar. I listened to the conversations. Lots of “ovs” and “sha” sounds with throaty vowels. It sounded like Russian.

“Deti, voz’mite svoi raketki,” the instructor said. ~~All the kids raced over to a bin of tennis rackets by the door.~~

*Don’t panic,* I thought to myself. *Just do what they’re doing.* While I was pulling out a racket, Vera elbowed me. “Ti kogda-nibud’ igray v tennis ran’she?”

I froze. She was looking me right in the eye, expecting me to answer. It sounded like a question—her voice went up a little at the end. **Slowly, I nodded my head.** That seemed to satisfy her, and she ran to a line on the floor. I guessed the instructor had told her to do that and I followed. I ended up standing in a line with Vera, Marta, and Anna. Across from me were Roman and Alex. They were both waving at me.

“Mal’chiki, stanovites na etu liniyu, devochki na druguyu,” the instructor said, annoyed.

The kids around me were laughing. I was standing with three girls. The two boys were on the other side. Had she divided it that way? I couldn’t know.

“Ryan,” she said again, pointing to Roman and Alex.

*It’s boys and girls,* I thought. I nodded my head and ran across.

That nod would serve me well in the coming weeks.

## When I got home that night, Mom asked me how tennis had gone.

“Fine,” I said, trying to sound casual. “Hey, are there a lot of Russian people in Oak Park?”

“Yeah, I think there’s a big community there,” Mom answered. “Are there some kids from Russian families in your class?”

“A few,” I answered.

I couldn’t tell Mom the truth. If I did, she’d call the community center and make a complaint. It would get back to the teacher and she’d tell the kids what an idiot I was for pretending I understood Russian. **They’d know I was an outsider. I’d be the same loser I was at school.**

## As it happened, I was pretty popular in the Russian tennis class.

Vera told me a joke every session (though I didn’t know if it was the same one or not), and I always laughed on cue, louder than everyone else to prove that I really got it.

### CONTEXT CLUES

What do you think the teacher is saying?



### AUTHOR’S CRAFT

What grammar rule is the author breaking—and why?

### CHARACTER

Why doesn’t Ryan just admit that he doesn’t know Russian?



### CHARACTER

Are Ryan’s fears reasonable?





### CHARACTER

What other reason might the kids have for wanting Ryan to be their partner?



### CONTEXT CLUES

What does *pantomime* mean?

### INFERENCE

How is Ryan feeling in this moment?

**Kids wanted me to be their practice partner, maybe because I made them look good.**

I even got what looked like a love note from Marta. It was about 10 lines of curly Russian text with a hand-drawn heart at the bottom. She seemed pretty upset that I didn't answer it.

I did have problems though. No conversation could go on too long (for obvious reasons). And nodding "yes" or "no" didn't always work. When it didn't, I would cross my legs and bounce: the universal gesture for "I have to go to the bathroom."

I spent a lot of time in the bathroom.

**Five weeks went by like this.** I had gone from the worst tennis player in the class to the worst tennis player on Earth.

I did my best to follow the lesson visually, but I was in a constant panic that I'd be found out. I was always behind the other kids because I never understood the instructions.

During our sixth session, we stopped practicing drills and started playing straight-up matches. "Anna! Roman! Davayte igrat'!" the instructor called, and Anna and Roman took up their sides on the makeshift court. "Podacha! Vozvrashchenie podachi!" she yelled as they hit the ball back and forth. I had no idea what the rules of tennis were.

I think Anna won. Or maybe it was Roman.

"Ryan! Vera! Davayte igrat'!" she called when they were done. Vera and I walked up to the court. I kept my eyes on her the whole time to make sure I was doing the right thing.

Vera served the ball, and I fell flat on my face trying to hit it.

I missed the next four serves. The game was over as soon as it started.

Nadia, the instructor, looked worried. "Studenty, otdohnite," she said. The kids all ambled to the bleachers. I followed like I always did, but Nadia put her hand on my chest. "Ne ty, Ryan."

*Oh no, I thought. She's talking to me.*

Nadia crouched down and spouted off a whole lot of complete nonsense. Her face looked serious, then kind, then annoyed. I tried to follow her eyebrows as they bounced around her forehead. **She pantomimed a racket and pretended to swing it.**

I imitated her—that usually worked.

More nonsense, hand gestures, and wild facial expressions. Then her voice went up and she stopped talking. She was looking at me like I was supposed to answer her.

I nodded my head "yes." The old standby.

She raised an eyebrow like that was weird. Then I shook it "no," very vigorously, like I super-disagreed with the "yes" I'd just given her.

"Chto?" she said, very confused.

This wasn't a yes or no question. Panic overwhelmed me. Should I pretend like I had to pee? She was looking at me very intensely. The other kids were looking too. I couldn't escape.

**I felt heat coming up from my shirt.**

"Vosky shnock ta, snovitov," I said, wide-eyed, panicked, and speaking completely made-up Russian. "Tisbani smoop ti baum."

It was a last-ditch effort. Maybe I'd picked up on something during my five weeks in nonstop-Russian land.

Nadia stared blankly at me for a moment, then she frowned. "Ryan, wait a moment," she said in perfect English. "Do you not speak Russian?"



"No!" I said louder than I meant to. I turned to the class and confessed. "I was afraid to say something. My name is Ryan Moop. You can all make fun of me now."

The kids looked at each other in shock.

"It's not a big deal, Ryan," Vera said, finally. "Why didn't you just say so?"

"Yeah, no problem, man," Roman said, walking over to me.

"OK, class," the instructor said, putting her hands on my shoulders. "English from now on."

**No one made fun of my name, or even teased me about faking Russian for five weeks.** Vera started telling me jokes in English, and Marta even translated her love note, but decided she'd rather just be friends.

Friends was good enough for me. I kept in contact with her and the other kids even when class was over. Vera moved to my school the next year, and **having someone I could trust made everything so much better.**

But I never, ever got good at tennis. ●



#### CHARACTER

How did Vera earn Ryan's trust? What do you think Ryan learned from this experience?

#### INFORMATIONAL TEXT

## Why You Don't Need to "Fit In"

Accept yourself for who you are instead. **BY BRENÉ BROWN**

**C**ontrary to what you might think, "fitting in" is different from "belonging." In fact, fitting in is the greatest barrier to belonging. Fitting in is twisting yourself into a human pretzel so a group of people will let you hang out with them. Belonging means letting yourself be seen as you really are.

Many of us suffer from a split between who we are and who we present to the world in order to be accepted. This kind of living is soul-sucking.

I've interviewed a lot of people who never fit in, who are what you might call "different": scientists, artists, thinkers. What they have in common is a tremendous amount of self-acceptance. One neurophysicist I met told me, "My parents didn't care that I was awkward and geeky. I was in a group of kids at school who translated books into the Klingon

language. And my parents were like, 'Awesome!' They took me to the Star Trek convention!" He got his sense of belonging from his parents. But if we don't get that from Mom and Dad, we have to create it for ourselves—or we will always feel as if we're standing outside of the big human party.

The truth is: Belonging starts with accepting yourself for who you are. Believing that you're enough is what gives you the courage to be authentic, vulnerable, and imperfect. When we don't have that, we shape-shift and turn into chameleons; we hustle for the worthiness we already possess. ●

A chameleon is a lizard that changes colors to blend in with its surroundings. In what way did Ryan behave like a chameleon?



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#### WRITING CONTEST

How did Ryan confuse his desire to belong with his desire to fit in? What advice would Brené Brown give him? Support your answer with text evidence. Send your response to **RYAN CONTEST**. Five winners will get *The Bully Book* by Eric Kahn Gale.

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